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A spy is a spy

Anything or anyone blurring or otherwise obscuring the obvious necessity for a distinct separation of press and state takes a substantial chunk out of the foundation of American freedom — and that is precisely what CIA Director Stansfield Turner did last week during a talk to the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

The director said that on three occasions he personally approved using journalists for secret intelligence operations — and that he would do so again if he felt justified.

But such blatant abuse of press freedom can never be justified. The use of foreign correspondents by the government indicates that the Carter administration, of which Admiral Turner is a part, now seems to be attempting to tether the press while at the same time unleashing the CIA.

In a frightening fashion, the director implied there was something unpatriotic about a journalist's refusal to serve his country by serving the CIA. In fact, an independent reporter is serving his country and its citizens simply by being independent.

Of immediate, and certainly legitimate, concern to the editors is the effect Turner's Pravda mentality, if unchecked, would have on the ability of foreign correspondents to function safely in dangerous areas of the world. Sources, moreover, should not be in doubt about whether they are talking to spies or journalists. Plus, if Americans are to have any faith in a free press they must be positive the reports they read are not written by undercover agents carrying reporters's note pads. If two, three or six foreign correspondents are in the employ of the CIA — then all such correspondents become suspect.

The American public has every right to expect that the newsmen and women who serve it strive for accuracy and fairness. No newsmen who sells his talents to the CIA is worthy of the title. The task of gathering and writing news is difficult enough without burdening the profession with the heavy mantle of possibly being an arm of government — a special pleader for the CIA.

Surely such a practice should be strictly prohibited by the government. But since the government does not have the good sense to bar that practice voluntarily, it should be outlawed in any future charter limiting CIA activities.